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RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 2226
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 5054
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0500
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 4938
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000787

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [ASEAN](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: THAIS PREPARED TO LAY GROUNDWORK FOR
IMPLEMENTATION OF ASEAN CHARTER

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: During Thailand's upcoming chairmanship of ASEAN, the RTG would focus on how to translate the recently signed Charter into practice, newly appointed Counselor for the MFA's ASEAN Division Suriya Chindawongse told us in a meeting March 5. He said that Thailand's position as ASEAN Chair was a priority issue for the current government, and explained that Thailand had already begun to address development of the structural, organizational, and financial underpinnings required for effective implementation of the Charter. In particular, Thailand expected to expand on the Charter's concept of a 'people-centered approach' by highlighting the importance of enhancing economic, transportation, and social links in the region. At the same time, Suriya stressed the need for support to carry out this ambitious agenda; he said Thailand stood ready to be receptive to ideas and resources from dialogue partners, especially the U.S. Overall, Suriya's update was long on hopeful prospects for pan-ASEAN harmony, but short on substance. END SUMMARY.

THAILAND TO SET PRECEDENTS FOR ASEAN

12. (C) Thailand is scheduled to assume the chairmanship of ASEAN at the July 2008 Ministerial Summit to be held in Singapore. Historically, member countries hold the chair position for one year, from July to July. However, according to the Charter signed by all member countries at the November 2007 ASEAN Summit, the organization would now follow the calendar year. Therefore, if the Charter is ratified by all ten member countries (to date only four countries - Singapore, Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei - have ratified the Charter), Thailand would be in the unusual position of serving as chair for 18 months. This means that Thailand would have significant input in ASEAN's community building process post-Charter.

13. (C) Thailand will hold the chair of ASEAN during this historic period due to a procedural coincidence, as the position is rotated among all members in alphabetical order. However, Suriya noted that Thailand had played a key role in ASEAN's major developments to date, from the organization's founding in 1967 to the drafting of the Charter. The RTG viewed its upcoming chairmanship of ASEAN as a precedent-setting opportunity to shape the future of the regional institution. Suriya expected the MFA to have to spend considerable time addressing organizational questions such as development of a budget that supported the Secretary General's new mandates, and procedural matters including how often members would meet. Substantively, Thailand looked forward to developing short and long term visions for the three pillars of the Charter: political-security cooperation, economic cooperation, and socio-cultural cooperation.

PROMOTING INTERCONNECTIVITY IN ASEAN

14. (C) Suriya became most enthusiastic when he discussed Thailand's plans to support ASEAN's commitment to the socio-cultural pillar of the Charter. He cited the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as already engaging the institution on political-security issues. The ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the economic blueprint currently served as platforms for economic cooperation. It was time to emphasize how ASEAN could benefit the people. Thailand believed that a key component of this effort was to enhance the region's interconnectivity.

15. (C) Suriya described 'interconnectivity' as enhanced economic, transportation, and social links in the region.

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For example, improved computer and internet connections, increased trade and transportation links, or less restricted movement across borders. Thailand also looked forward to strengthening ASEAN's ability to address challenges that faced the region. Whether it be making the ASEAN region drug-free by 2010 or developing an effective human rights body, Thailand planned to focus on a people-centered approach, Suriya said. (COMMENT: This 'people-centered approach' is ASEAN's latest catch phrase.. ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan, regional leaders, and even the press have been using it quite liberally in recent months. It's not all hype, however: Thailand's civil society sector is more active than that of most other ASEAN member countries. Therefore, the RTG is in a better position than many of its neighbors to implement a strategy that incorporates this idea of developing ASEAN to be more responsive to the people. END COMMENT)

INTEGRATING ALL PLAYERS IN ASEAN

16. (C) Thailand conceived of its chairmanship as an integrated approach to addressing ASEAN priorities, Suriya stated. Effective implementation of the Charter would require government, civil society, and private sector cooperation. While each national government would identify its own way to engage all three, as chair Thailand intended to focus on how to include civil society and the private sector in ASEAN's internal review process and enhance their interface with the official track one discussions.

17. (C) Domestically, Suriya believed that Thai civil society supported ASEAN and Thailand's ratification of the Charter. He conceded that special interest groups, particularly in the areas of human rights and economic security, would campaign hard to have the RTG consider their positions. He would not elaborate further as to how the RTG would incorporate civil society in Thailand's ratification of the Charter, or the

country's efforts to lead ASEAN community building. He also noted that the RTG had publicly indicated on several occasions that the country's chairmanship of ASEAN was a priority issue, which meant that supporting resources would be forthcoming.

COMMENT

18. (C) Thailand is in the early stages of developing its plan of action to implement the recently signed Charter once the RTG takes over as chair of ASEAN in July. The government has a clear sense of the daunting task it faces in this position at what could be a crucial moment for ASEAN, as it attempts to translate the Charter into practice. At this point, the MFA has all its buzzwords in place - 'interconnectivity' 'people-centered approach' - but is not yet discussing how precisely to achieve all this pan-ASEAN harmony. To successfully accomplish its goals, the RTG will require substantial support from across the government and Thai civil society, in addition to support from dialogue partners such as the USG. Suriya noted that he was passing the message to all dialogue partners that expectations of Thailand would be high and that the support of dialogue partners - financially (NFI) and otherwise - would be crucial to Thailand's ability to live up to these expectations. End Comment.

BIOGRAPHIC NOTE

19. (C) The Embassy welcomes Suriya's appointment as Counselor for overseeing affairs related to Thailand's upcoming chairmanship of ASEAN. He is known to us from previous collaboration on the ASEAN-US Enhanced Partnership

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initiative, as well as his involvement in former Foreign Minister Surakiart's 2006 campaign for the UN Secretary General position. The son of a former Thai Ambassador, Suriya holds a Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and interacts easily with Americans. We have found him to be a highly capable interlocutor who is responsive to our requests and positions on sensitive issues.

JOHN